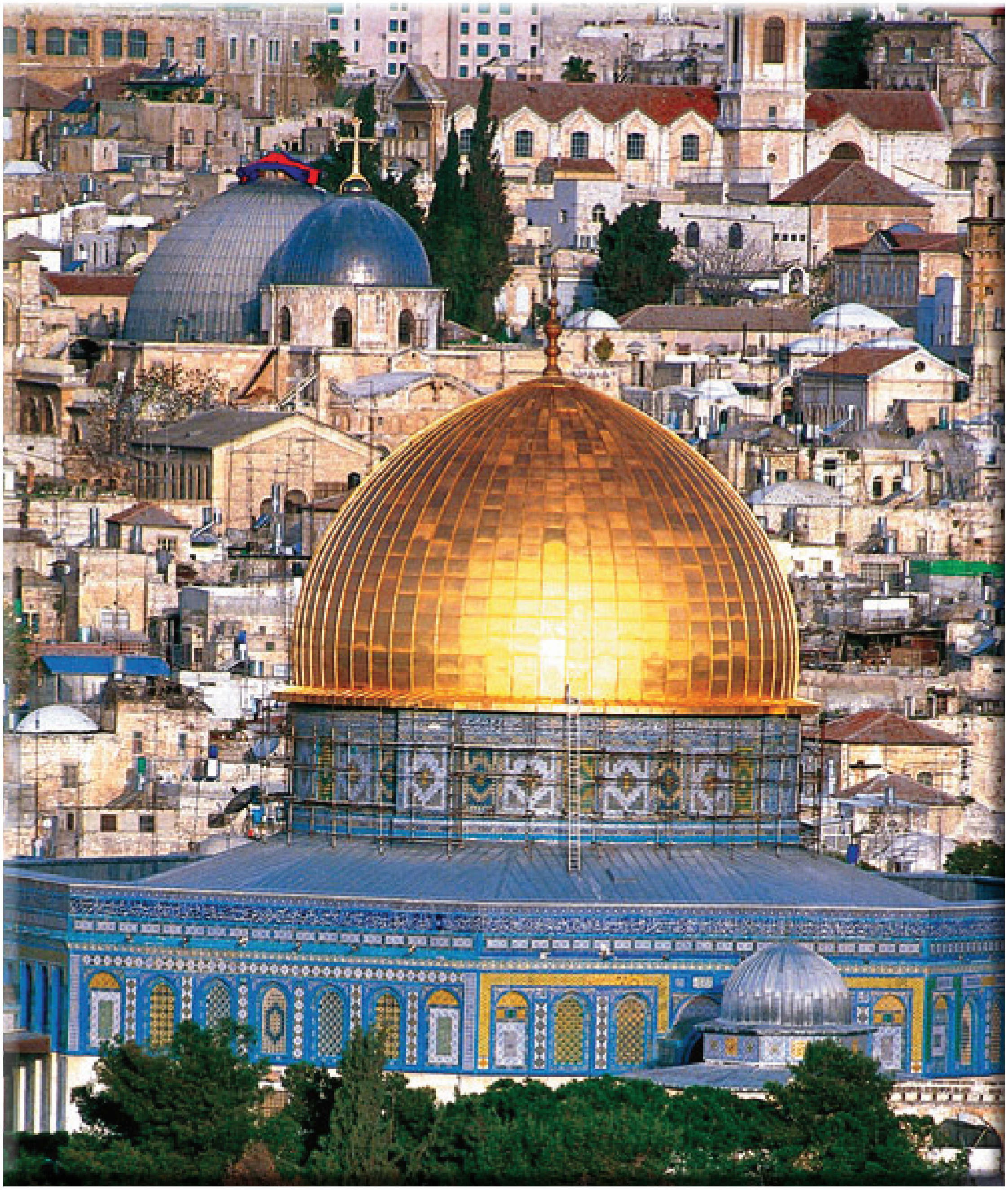
Islam in the Ancient World



Islam in the Ancient World

Staff for this book:

Sarah Yeomans—Editor
Sara Murphy—Web Editor
Susan Laden—Publisher

Biblical Archaeology Society
4710 41st Street, NW
Washington, DC 20016
www.biblicalarchaeology.org

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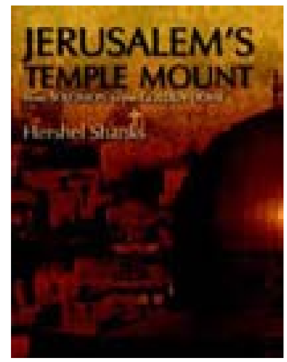
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Also from the Biblical Archaeology Society

Jerusalem's Temple Mount
From Solomon to the Golden Dome

By Hershel Shanks

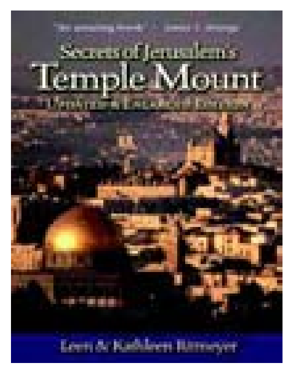


Few places in the world have enjoyed such religious significance as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. According to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim doctrine, it was here that Adam was buried after being expelled from Eden. This is also the site where it is said Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son, where Solomon built his Temple, and where Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven. Using 160 vivid illustrations and revealing research, Hershel Shanks takes you from the Golden Dome backwards through time in an exploration of the temples that once stood in this spot.

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Contents

Cover Image: Looming over Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock, erected by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685–705 A.D.), served as a physical emblem of the dominance of Islam.

Introduction

Many of the ancient places, people and events that populate Biblical history are also a part of the Islamic tradition. This latest exciting e-book from the Biblical Archaeology Society, *Islam in the Ancient World*, explores some of Islam's significant history and sites, bringing a new perspective to Biblical history and traditions.

Soon after Jerusalem was conquered in 638 A.D. by Khalid ibn Thabit, it emerged in its full glory within Islamic religious thought and practice. Jerusalem quickly became the focus of extensive imperial building activity, transforming it from a predominantly Christian town into a holy Muslim city. Islamic traditions regarding the conquest were shaped and recorded at least a century after the actual event took place. By then, the Islamic holiness of Jerusalem was well established, and the city's name had become forever attached to Islamic hagiography. Jerusalem's Muslim conquerors quickly realized the importance of the city and sought to make their own mark on its sacred architecture. Discover how the construction of the glimmering Dome of the Rock and the impressive Al-Aqsa Mosque sought both to draw on earlier religious traditions and to outshine the pre-existing monuments of Jerusalem in *Islam on the Temple Mount* by Moshe Sharon.

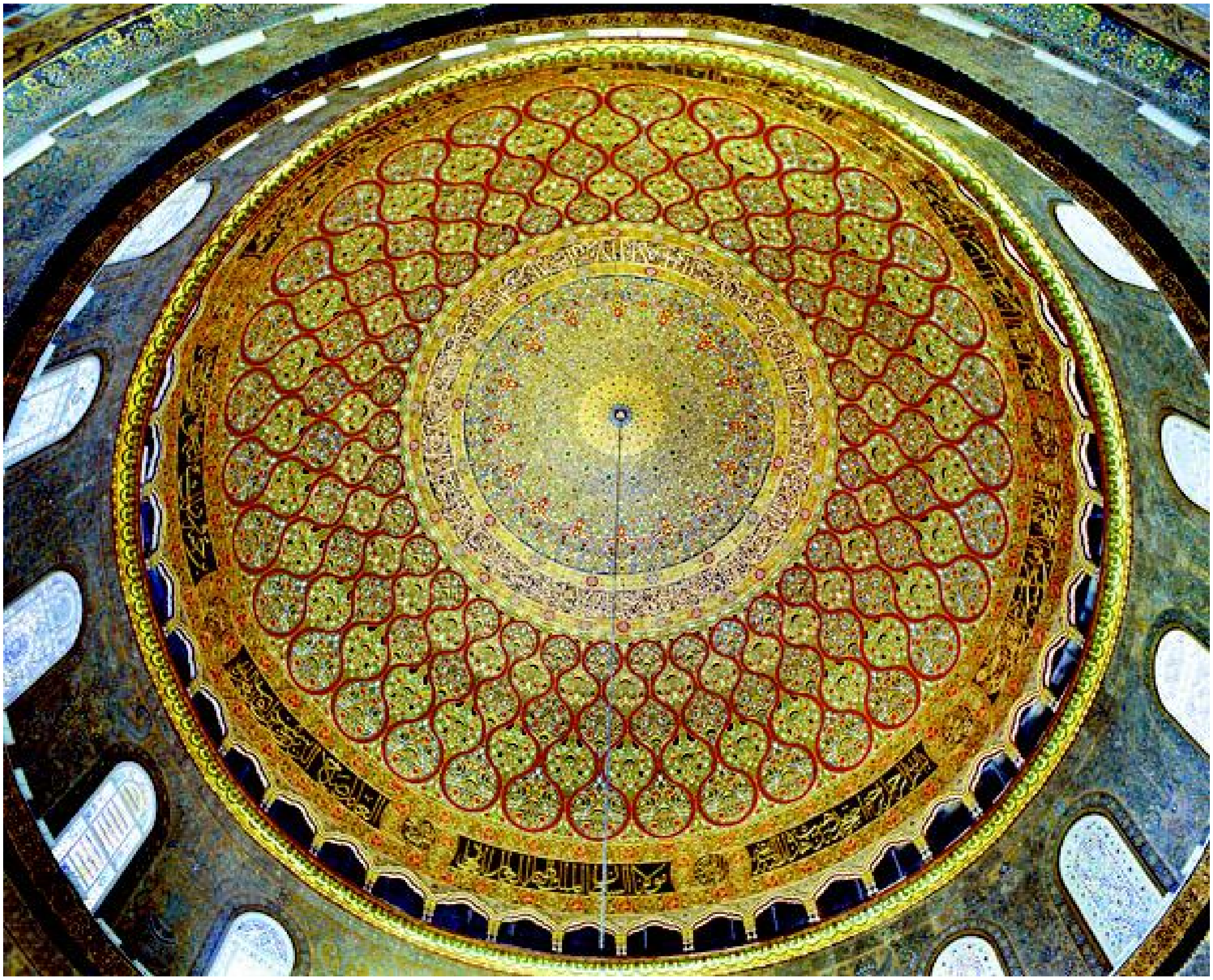
In the 10th-century A.D., an extraordinary catalogue was published called the *Fihrist*: a compendium of all the significant written works on religion, science and the humanities that were available at the end of the first millennium A.D. It includes a digest of ancient Greek and Roman literature, much of which was lost to the West after the fall of the Roman Empire and the destruction of the Alexandria Library. The *Fihrist* also lists classical texts that were preserved by Eastern scholars in the great imperial libraries of Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus and Khurasan. When this work made its way west as the second millennium dawned, ancient knowledge was once again available to western culture. J. Harold Ellens describes the important cultural exchange that came from in this remarkable book in *The Fihrist: How An Arab Bookseller Saved Civilization*.

When we begin to compare Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael in the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible, we find that despite some striking differences, their stories still have much in common. In *Abraham's Sons: How the Bible and Qur'an See the Same Story Differently* by John Kaltner, an exploration of these similarities and divergences not only reveals what is distinctive about the Qur'an and Islam but sheds unexpected light on the Biblical text.

Some of Saudi Arabia's most important ancient archaeological sites lie in the northwestern province of Al-Jouf, which is bordered on the south by the Nafud, one of the country's two great deserts. One of these sites, Domat Al-Jandal, has a history that stretches back at least 2,700 years to an attack by King Sennacherib in 688 B.C., and includes a visit from the prophet Mohammed himself in the 5th century A.D. Nowhere is the feeling of the past more vivid than at Qasr Marid, a picturesque walled fortress that resembles an elaborate sand castle. Although legend says the fort was constructed by a grandson of the Biblical prophet Abraham, archaeological excavations carried out there in the 1980s uncovered pottery sherds dating only to the Nabatean era. Julie Skurdenis describes these intriguing archaeological sites in *Desert Fortresses: Al-Jouf, Saudi Arabia*.

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Islam on the Temple Mount



The glowing cupola of the Dome of the Rock, rising to a height of 95 feet, is made of wood painted with a gold alloy is sixty-five feet in diameter—the same size as the dome on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

In Muslim Tradition the Dome of the Rock Restored Solomon's Temple

By Moshe Sharon

In 638 C.E. Christian Jerusalem fell to a minor Arab officer by the name of Khalid ibn Thabit from the clan of Fahm. The patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, had by then lost all hope of relief from Constantinople, since all the major cities of Syria (including Damascus) had opened their gates to the invading Muslim armies.

Most of these armies had already moved north or south, subjugating whatever remained of the Syrian and African provinces of the Byzantine empire. Caesarea alone refused to capitulate and was brought under siege, which cut it off from the Palestinian hinterland but not from marine lines of communication with the center of the empire in Constantinople. Soon, however, Caesarea would succumb to Muslim armies headed by Mu'awiyah—an Arab aristocrat who belonged to the Umayyah family in Mecca and who, 20 years later, would become the first member of the Umayyad dynasty to rule the new Islamic empire.

Jerusalem, an isolated city on the edge of the Judean desert, might well have held out against the invading Arabs a little longer. The Arabs had spread themselves throughout the countryside and did not seem to have laid a proper siege upon the city, lacking the technical means or experience to besiege such a fortified settlement. Jerusalem of the early-seventh century—the holy heart of the Christian world, the focus of religious sentiments, pious aspirations, miraculous events and Biblical history—was a nearly impregnable bastion. It was a Late Antique Roman city with thick walls, scores of towers and imposing gates.

For whatever reason, the Christian patriarch of Jerusalem nonetheless decided to capitulate, but only a minor Arab commander was on hand to take charge of the holy city. Most Arab sources skip this aspect of the conquest of Jerusalem; the only reference to Sophronius's somewhat anticlimactic surrender is recorded in a ninth-century description of the Islamic conquests.[1] History, it seems, willed that this particular account should remain in the shadows of the historical record.

Soon after Jerusalem was occupied by Muslims, it emerged in its full glory within Islamic religious thought and practice. Jerusalem quickly became the focus of extensive imperial building activity, transforming it from a predominantly Christian town into a holy Muslim city. Islamic traditions regarding the conquest were shaped and recorded at least a century after the actual event took place. By then, the Islamic holiness of Jerusalem was well established, and the city's name had become forever attached to Islamic hagiography. It was inconceivable, therefore, that Islam's first encounter with Jerusalem should be an ordinary event. Indeed, Jerusalem's Muslim conquerors quickly realized the importance of the city, and many prominent Muslims wanted to take credit for this new and special jewel in the Islamic crown.

Of the many traditions that arose regarding the capture of Jerusalem, one in particular took precedence and eventually came to replace all others as the conquest's "canonical report." This tradition attributes the conquest of Jerusalem to Caliph 'Umar (634–644 C.E.); it describes in great detail his taking of the city, which culminated with the caliph standing on the Temple Mount and establishing Jerusalem's first mosque (which came to bear 'Umar's name) on the site. The choice of 'Umar as the conqueror of Jerusalem and the builder of the first mosque marks the beginning of Jerusalem's transformation into an Islamic holy place.

Jerusalem breathes messianism. Both Judaism and Christianity regard Jerusalem as the place where their messianic aspirations are to be fulfilled. For Jews, the messiah, a scion of the house of David, will establish his throne in Jerusalem, the capital city of their ancestor, renewing Jewish kingdom and freedom. For Christians, the messiah, also a son of David, will return to Jerusalem—the place of his passion, death and resurrection—to usher in the End of Days and the Millennial Age.

Islamic traditions about the conquest of Jerusalem are also imbued with messianism. Caliph 'Umar is the most venerated figure in Islam after the prophet Muhammad himself. Biographies and other early sources emphasize the title of *al-faruq* bestowed on 'Umar. The interpretation of this word in Arabic sources—"he who differentiates [*farraqa*] between right and wrong"—is already charged with the idea of divine choice. Also, the meaning of the word

in its Aramaic origin is "savior" or "deliverer," which is to say "messiah." Islamic tradition therefore describes 'Umar's (the Savior's) entrance into Jerusalem as a messianic event. Like Jesus, he reaches the city from the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane, enters through the eastern gate, then proceeds to the Temple Mount, discovers the place of Solomon's Temple and restores worship at the ancient holy place by building a mosque.

Early in the seventh century, messianic ardor was in the air, and eschatological ideas were central to the Islamic message. The Prophet Muhammad emphasized that the Day of Judgment was at hand. Tradition tells us that Muhammad would lift two fingers, one pressed against the other, and say: "There is as much space between me and the Hour [of Judgment]." The Koran opens with praise to God, the "Lord of the Day of Judgment," and is full of eschatological references and descriptions.

Once Jerusalem fell into Muslim hands, it was natural for the city to become associated with Islamic eschatological ideas and visions, for both Judaism and Christianity had long identified the city as the setting of both messianic events and the Last Judgment.

Jerusalem had been under Christian rule for 300 years. Christian holy places stood as the physical embodiment of Christian history, commemorating the life, passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, as well as other events connected with the Virgin, the apostles and the early martyrs. Two Christian edifices in particular represented the early-seventh-century expectation that the Second Coming was close at hand: the complex of the Holy Sepulchre, the presumed place of Jesus' burial, and the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives, the spot from which Jesus ascended into heaven. These two symbols of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ—standing directly opposite one another—bolstered Christians' faith that Jesus would soon establish the eternal divine order by returning to the place from which he had left earth.

Between the two lay the Temple Mount, which Jewish tradition identifies as Mount Moriah, where Abraham bound and nearly sacrificed his son Isaac. The Temple Mount was also the site of Herod's Temple and probably Solomon's Temple. When the Muslims arrived, however, the huge rectangular platform lay in desolation, mute testimony to Jesus' prophecy: "Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6). For Christians, the desolation of the Temple Mount was proof that their faith had triumphed over Judaism.

The Muslims found Jerusalem throbbing with Christian piety. The Christian holiness of the city had physical manifestations: churches, basilicas, monasteries, pilgrims' hostels, martyrions (structures raised over the tombs of Christian martyrs), chapels and scores of holy relics of various kinds. The faithful came to the city from all over the Christian world. In 630 C.E., after defeating the Persians, who had held the city for a brief period of 16 years, the Christian emperor Heraclius returned to Jerusalem with the Holy Cross, which the Persians had removed to their capital, Ctesiphon. The sight of a Christian emperor bringing the true symbol of the death and resurrection of Jesus back to Jerusalem was a momentous event, which only heightened the messianic expectations. Was it not time for the return of Christ himself, now that his cross was restored to his sepulchre? Jerusalem's new Muslim conquerors understood the city's intense holiness, and the eschatological visions of the Koran now found physical expression in this sacred city.

Although the Jerusalem conquered by the Muslim Arabs had been a Christian city for 300 years, underlying this physical space was a long-established Jewish tradition. Half a millennium had passed since Jews had been banished from Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Hadrian, but the signs of the Jewish presence had not been obliterated. One reason is that Christianity itself,

though emphasizing the role of Jesus and the people who surrounded him, is steeped in the Old Testament and preserves the memory of its major personalities.

But there was more than that. The site of the Jewish Temple, though left in desolation since the Roman destruction, was nevertheless a space that could not be ignored. Its desolation did not only remind Christians of the success and truth of their religion: This spot, the site of Mount Moriah and the Jewish Temple, which would not be rebuilt until Jesus' Second Coming, was nonetheless *the site of the Jewish Temple*. The Temple Mount was thus a sacred site, elevated above other sites. It was therefore not surprising that the Temple Mount, so intimately connected in tradition with such figures as Adam, Abraham, David and Solomon (the Muslims had no, or very little, knowledge about the Second Temple or Herod), appealed to Muslims when their ruler embarked upon reshaping Jerusalem as a Muslim holy place.

Mount Moriah and the unusual perforated rock on the top of it became the heart of this process of the Islamization of Jerusalem. It was from this point, for Muslims, that the holy took its shape.

In 1996 the distinguished Islamic scholar Oleg Grabar published a book called *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*,[2] which discusses the process by which Islam reshaped Christian Jerusalem into an Islamic holy city allied to Mecca and Medina, the two holy shrines of Islam in western Arabia. Grabar identifies the period in which the Islamization of Jerusalem occurred as beginning with the Muslim conquest and ending with the Crusader occupation—that is, between 638 C.E. and 1099. During this period Jerusalem came under the rule of several Muslim dynasties: the early years of the caliphate of Medina from 632 until 661 C.E.; the Umayyad caliphate from 661 until 750; Abbasid rule from Baghdad, which lasted from 750 to 878; and a series of rulers from Egypt, including the Tulunids, Ikhshids and Fatimids, between 878 and the arrival of Crusaders in 1099.

Of all these rulers, Grabar sees the Umayyads as the most important, and of all the Umayyad buildings, he rightly regards the Dome of the Rock as the most significant Muslim edifice in Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock, built by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685–705 C.E.) was essential in shaping the Islamic holiness of Jerusalem.

Grabar had been fascinated with the Dome of the Rock for more than 40 years. (His 1959 article, "The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem,"[3] is still one of the best essays written on the subject.) Unlike other non-Muslim scholars, Grabar had the full cooperation of Muslim Waqf authorities and was allowed to examine many places on the Temple Mount (called the Haram al-Sharif, or "Noble Sanctuary," by Muslims) that no non-Muslim today would be allowed to examine, let alone record in detail. Grabar was also fortunate to be working with a highly talented photographer, Said Nuseibeh, and the computer experts Muhammad al-Asad and Abeer Audeh, all of whom had free access to the Dome of the Rock, Al-Aqsa Mosque and every other place on the Temple Mount, whether above or below the ground. The fruits of this labor are evident in *The Shape of the Holy* as well as in *The Dome of the Rock*, which Grabar published with Said Nuseibeh (also in 1996).[4]

The Dome of the Rock, which represents the Islamic reshaping of Jerusalem, was built a mere two generations after the Islamic conquest. It is universally regarded as one of the most beautiful and fascinating monuments of early Islam.

The building of the Dome of the Rock opposite the dome of the Holy Sepulchre Church, which for more than 300 years had towered over the desolate area of the Temple Mount, challenged the Christian dominance of the city. Built at a higher elevation than the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock was a dazzlingly beautiful Islamic structure. According to the tenth-century

Arab geographer Al-Muqaddasi, who lived in Jerusalem, many Arabs believed the Dome of the Rock was originally built to compete in beauty with the splendor of the churches, especially the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This, he added, would prevent Muslims from being enchanted by the Christian holy places.

But the Dome of the Rock did much more than that. Two inscriptions on copper plates over the eastern and southern gates of the structure carry clear messages: "The Unity of God and the Prophecy of Muhammad are true," and "The Sonship of Jesus and the Trinity are false."

This message repeats itself, sometimes in a shorter form, on all epigraphical material from the time of the Caliph ʻAbd al-Malik's construction of the building onward—on coins, milestones and other building texts. Like many fashions that began in the court and were imitated by the public, this simple declaration of faith became fashionable as well. The text, "There is no God but Allah alone; he has no companion," for example, was inscribed on gold and silver coins that were put into circulation around 696 C.E. At a Byzantine fortress called Rujm Sfar on a road from the Arabah to Beersheva, I found a stone inscribed with seventh- or early-eighth-century script reading "I, Yusuf ibn Zubayd al-Ayli, do not associate anything with Allah" (*la ushriku bi allah shay'an*).

The Dome of the Rock was more than a vehicle for the expression of anti-Christian policy, however. The choice of a dome on top of a circular structure surrounded by a double octagonal ambulatory was not accidental. This architectural shape was common in buildings of a commemorative nature (such as *martyria*). Grabar points out that the Dome of the Rock belongs to a class of buildings intended to make a statement, in this case to indicate the presence of Islam in full power and splendor, eclipsing both the Holy Sepulchre and the Nea (Justinian's New Church of the Virgin). "It belonged to a relatively rare category of shrines, architectural compositions that seem more important by what they are than by what happens in them," Grabar observes. The Dome of the Rock was not a mosque, it was a shrine, and it no doubt was built to honor and commemorate the rock over which the dome itself was raised.

What made the rock so important? Although most of the traditions regarding the rock were recorded after the building was constructed, they nonethless retain ancient memories. The most important memory involved the Jewish Temple built by Solomon; the Muslims believed the rock of the Dome of the Rock was a vestige of Solomon's Temple.

There is sound reason to believe that soon after the Arab conquest, both Muslims and Jews (who could now return to, and live in, the city) worshiped at the rock around which the Jews had already developed annual pious rituals. Early in the fourth century, Jews were allowed to visit the Temple Mount (from which they had been barred since 135 C.E.) on the ninth day of the month of Ab (when both the First and the Second Temples had been destroyed, according to Jewish tradition) to lament the destruction of Jerusalem, the burning of the Temple and the loss of Jewish statehood. In the year 333 the so-called Bordeaux Pilgrim wrote:

> Not far from the statue of Hadrian [erected on the Temple Mount within the complex of the Temple to Jupiter built by emperor Hadrian after the subjugation of the Second Jewish revolt in 135] there is a rock with a hole in it to which Jews come annually; they anoint it and tear their cloths, lamenting, and sobbing. And then they go away.[5]

Some Christian sources say that when the Jews were allowed to visit the place of the ruined Temple during the Byzantine period, they would anoint the rock. This should not seem unusual

from the viewpoint of Jewish customs, for anointing, as a sign of consecration, is a Biblical practice. In Exodus 40:9–16, for instance, God orders Moses to anoint the Tabernacle for the purpose of its consecration: "And thou shall take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and all that is therein ... Thus did Moses according to all that the Lord commanded him." The consecration of any object or person involved the use of a special holy unguent. (See 1 Samuel 16:13 for the anointment of David as king of Israel.) The Hebrew word *messiah* means "the anointed," as does the Greek word for "messiah": *christos*, or Christ. So perhaps every year on the ninth of Ab, members of priestly families, joined by common pilgrims, would rub holy oil on the rock while others would recite from Psalms or Lamentations. The fact that the Jews could show the Muslims the place of the (Solomonic) Temple was of great importance for the Muslim rulers.

Many years ago I proposed that the Dome of the Rock was built by the early Muslims to symbolize the renewal of the Temple. The new holy structure thus served as a physical refutation of the Christian belief that the site should remain in desolation.[6] Similarly, early Jewish midrash, though composed some 60 years after the building of the Dome of the Rock, hails the Muslims as the initiators of Israel's redemption and praises one Muslim ruler as the builder of the "House of the Lord."

A very elaborate Islamic tradition describes the Dome of the Rock as the Solomonic Temple. This tradition appears in the collection of traditions belonging to the literary genre known as "Praises of Jerusalem," compiled early in the 11th century (more than 50 years before the First Crusade).

The Muslim scholar who compiled this tradition, a Jerusalem resident named al-Wasiti, describes in great detail the building of the Dome of the Rock and the various reasons for its erection. After stating that the Dome of the Rock was built on the site of Solomon's Temple, he tells of the rituals that were performed in the structure. These rituals were completely alien to Islamic practice, but al-Wasiti reports them without any objection; indeed, he seems to have believed that they were perfectly appropriate for the edifice in which they were performed. The rituals involved the anointing of the rock with a special unguent (al-Wasiti describes in detail the composition and preparation of the unguent) and the burning of such large amounts of incense inside the edifice that thick smoke obscured the dome above. When the doors of the Dome of the Rock were opened, the fragrance of the incense reached the upper market of the city.

Immediately after describing the rituals performed in the Dome of the Rock, which are reminiscent of rituals performed in the Jewish Temple, al-Wasiti states that "the Rock was in the time of Solomon the son of David 12 cubits high and there was a Dome over it." He then quotes another tradition:

> It is written in the Tawrat [Bible]: "Be happy Jerusalem," which is *Bayt al-Maqdis* [in Hebrew, *Beit ha-Miqdash*, or the Temple] and the Rock which is called *Haykal* [in Hebrew, *Heikhal*, meaning the Temple or Sanctuary; compare Psalms 27:4 and 65:5 (65:4 in English)].

The main activities at the Dome of the Rock took place on Mondays and Thursdays, which in Jewish tradition are days of special sacredness appropriate for peforming rituals. For example, the Law is read in public during the morning service on these days. Mondays and Thursdays are also days of fasting, and special supplications are added to the usual morning and afternoon prayers. The fact that special rituals alien to Islam were performed in the Dome of the Rock on these

Jewish sacred days—rituals involving the anointing of the Rock, the lavish use of incense and the lighting of candles—connects this Islamic tradition with the service of the sons of Aaron the high priest in the Temple. The influence of ancient Jewish memories on this tradition is so profound that al-Wasiti quotes a Hebrew prayer—without knowing its exact translation—that he says was uttered in the Solomonic Temple (in Hebrew, *barukh atta Adonay*, or "blessed art thou the Lord").[7]

All this suggests that the building of the Dome of the Rock was meant to be an important statement of a political and religious nature.

According to Islamic tradition, immediately after the building of the Dome of the Rock, five Jewish families were employed to clean the place and prepare wicks for its lamps. It is difficult to imagine that the Jewish families who worked in the Dome of the Rock would have been simple street sweepers. More likely, they were Jews from priestly families who were honored with the task of serving in the holy Temple, even if that meant preparing wicks for candles and cleaning the Temple's courts. They may well have felt themselves to be like the "righteous" described in the Psalms: "Planted in the House of the Lord, / they flourish in the courts of our God" (Psalm 92:14 [92:13 in English]).

In those days there was no Rabbinic prohibition preventing Jews from entering the sacred precincts of the Temple. That prohibition was not introduced until late in the Mamluk period, after the Crusades. The first mention of the prohibition comes in a letter sent from Jerusalem by Rabbi Obadia da Bartinoro to his father in 1488.[8]

The shaping of the holiness of Jerusalem, and particularly the shaping of the holiness of the Temple Mount in the Islamic religious consciousness, was influenced by the Jewish and Christian traditions encountered by Muslims after their swift conquest of the Syrian provinces of the Byzantine empire. The Koran does not mention Jerusalem, and the Arabs who conquered it came to learn about its spiritual importance only after more intimate contact with Jews and Christians; they were then exposed to the Biblical accounts of the city and to the many traditions regarding Solomon's Temple. Solomon *is* mentioned in the Koran; he is venerated as the wisest prophet of God. In that period of early Islam, however, Muslims knew little about the major Biblical figures who appear in the Koran, and they needed Jewish and Christian assistance to learn more about them.

The Jews contributed to the deep messianic feelings and expectations that had already existed among the Muslims—especially by encouraging the new conquerors, who had been regarded as heralding the final redemption of Israel, to renew worship on the Temple Mount. When the Dome of the Rock was built, the rituals performed in it were reminiscent of the rituals that had been performed in the Solomonic Temple: the anointing of the Rock, the burning of incense and the lighting of oil lamps on Monday and Thursday. These actions clearly indicate that the Muslims wanted to link themselves historically with Solomon, the great prophet-king. In doing so, they leapt back past Christianity—then their main enemy—and challenged the Christian idea that the Temple would remain desolate until Jesus' Second Coming.

For the Jews, on the other hand, the Umayyad caliph who built the Dome of the Rock was the one "who repairs the breaches of the Temple."[9] For them, the Muslim occupation was the beginning of redemption.

Notes

1 Ahmad Ibn Yahya Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan* (Leiden, 1866), trans. P.K. Hitti as *The Origins of the Islamic State* (New York, 1916).

[2] Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[3] Grabar, "The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem," *Ars Orientalis* 3 (1959).

[4] Grabar and Said Nuseibeh, *The Dome of the Rock* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996).

[5] Pilgrim of Bordeaux, *Guide to the Holy Land*, quoted in M. Avi-Yonah, *In the Days of Rome and Byzantium* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 142.

[6] Moshe Sharon, "The 'Praises of Jerusalem' as a Source for the Early History of Islam," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 49:1/2 (1992), pp. 55–68.

[7] al-Wasiti, *Fada'il al-Bayt al-Muqaddas*, ed. Izhak Hasson (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 72ff.

[8] See Avraham Ya'ari, *Igrot Eretz Yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1950), p. 134.

[9] *Nistarot de-Rabbi Shim'on Bar Yohay* (c. 750 A.D.), quoted in Adolph Jellinek, ed., *Bet Ha-Midrasch* (Leipzig, 1853), vol. 3, p. 79.

The Fihrist



An Arab translation of a treatise by the first-century C.E. Greek physician Dioscorides

How an Arab book seller saved civilization

By J. Harold Ellens

In a fiery speech delivered at Clermont, France, in 1095 C.E., Pope Urban II called on Western Christians to expel the "Infidel" from the Holy Land. Thus the Pope unleashed the Crusades, during which European armies gained control of most of the Levant, including Jerusalem. The Pope also unleashed something else—a kind of frenzied destructiveness that frequently accompanies righteous fury. The wars of the following two centuries were marked by unimaginable and often

irrational acts of rapine and murder, not the least of which was the Crusader attack in 1203 upon Constantinople, in which hundreds of thousands of Eastern Orthodox Christians were slaughtered.

In return, the West received one of the greatest gifts ever presented by one civilization to another. The Crusades opened up a rich mine of Eastern scholarship. The West would be civilized by the "Infidel," informed by refined Persian and Arab scientists, historians, physicians, poets and philosophers.

An important instrument in this cultural exchange was a remarkable book, the *Fihrist* (*Catalogue*). This tenth-century C.E. book is a catalogue of all the significant written works on religion, science and the humanities that were available at the end of the first millennium C.E. It includes a digest of ancient Greek and Roman literature, much of which was lost to the West after the fall of the Roman Empire and the destruction of the Alexandria Library.[1] The *Fihrist* also lists classical texts that were preserved by Eastern scholars in the great imperial libraries of Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus and Khurasan.

The breadth of learning revealed by the *Fihrist* is astonishing. It treats language, calligraphy and holy scriptures such as the Torah, the Gospels and the Koran. It contains chapters on Arab grammarians, history and politics, pre-Islamic poetry, the literature of the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) caliphates, as well as chapters on prominent jurists and legal authorities. It provides a summary of philosophy from the Hellenic thinker, Thales of Miletus (c. 620–555 B.C.E.), to the end of the first millennium C.E.—devoting considerable ink to Plato and Aristotle, even recording the entire text of Aristotle's will. The *Fihrist* discusses mathematics, astronomy, medicine, fables and legends, Christian and Islamic sects, alchemy and bookmaking, and it tells what was known of such faraway places as India, Indochina and China.

The author of this signal work, Abu 'l-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Nadim (c. 935–990 C.E.), was probably born in Baghdad, where his father ran a bookstore. The name "al-Nadim" (literally, "courtier") means that he was a court official of some sort. His father was a *warrag*, or entrepreneur. Al-Nadim probably received a normal education: beginning instruction at the mosque at age six, memorizing much of the Koran by early adolescence, and then entering one of the mosque's study circles. During the course of his life, he also had the opportunity to study under some of the luminaries of his day, such as the famous jurist Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi, the mathematician Yunus al-Qass and the historian Abu 'Abd Allah al-Marzubani.

Al-Nadim's greatest source of learning, however, was his father's bookstore, where he was employed. No doubt his research was extremely useful to his father and their potential customers, especially his detailed knowledge of important books and authors. One imagines that his daily routine included copying manuscripts, entertaining scholars and acquiring books.[2] In chapter four of the *Fihrist*, al-Nadim explains that his life's work was "to present the names of the poets and the amount of verses written by each poet among them … so that whoever desires to collect books and poems can have this information." Perhaps not accidentally, this system closely corresponds to that developed by the third-century B.C.E. scholar Callimachus for recording books in Egypt's Alexandria Library.[3]

One of al-Nadim's biographers refers to him as a Mu'tazili—that is, a member of a heretical Islamic sect that embraced the rationalistic and humanistic aspects of Islamic thought. The Mu'tazili, for instance, rejected traditional Islamic determinism, according to which everything happens because of the will of God. They believed, instead, that God's justice could only exist if human beings were the authors of their own actions—and thus were punished or rewarded according to what they, not only God, willed and did. Even though al-Nadim was a Shi'ite who

considered the rival Sunni Muslims crude and ignorant, he must have been seriously interested in the Mu'tazili, since he devotes a large part of chapter five to the sect.[4] Mu'tazilism also seems like the sort of philosophy that would appeal to a man of al-Nadim's learning.

Al-Nadim added to, arranged and rearranged his encyclopedia until his untimely death at the age of 55. On the title page of the *Fihrist* manuscript in Dublin's Chester Beatty Library (see the second sidebar to this article) is a note, almost certainly penned by the great historian al-Maqrizi (1365–1441), indicating that al-Nadim died on the tenth day before the end of the month of Sha'ban in 990/1. Manuscripts of the *Fihrist* in al-Nadim's own handwriting were probably placed in the royal library at Baghdad. In 1229 an Arab scholar claimed that he had worked from a manuscript of the *Fihrist* in its author's hand; in 1252 the lexicographer al-Saghani made a similar claim.

One of al-Nadim's persistent interests was the Arabic language. He cites scholarly debates about the origins of Arabic script—whether it was developed in a small Midianite Bedouin encampment in modern northwest Saudi Arabia or was borrowed from foreigners. Some sources say that Adam passed the script down, al-Nadim tells us; others claim that Ishmael gave it to his descendants. Al-Nadim is not much concerned with these folk traditions, but he is very interested in transcriptions of the Koran in the various dialects, scripts, hands and illuminations available in his day.

Al-Nadim not only sold and catalogued books, he was passionate about them. In the *Fihrist*, he comments on books and scripts of the Persians, Greeks, Hebrews (archaic and current), Syrians, Saxons, Chinese, Turks, Indians, Nubians, Russians, Bulgarians, Franks and Armenians. He loved all aspects of bookmaking, from orthography and calligraphy to methods of sharpening pens and making paper. Books, for al-Nadim, were almost alive; they were friends and teachers. "[B]ooks are the shells of wisdom, which are split open for the pearls of character," he records one source as saying. From another source he quotes: "If books had not bound together the experiences of former generations, the shackles of later generations in their forgetfulness would not have been loosed." Books represented an ideal existence without the failings to which men and women are prone. As one source says,

> *We have companions of whose conversation we never weary;*
> *Confiding and trustworthy whether absent or present,*
> *They give us the benefit of their knowledge … of what has passed,*
> *With wise opinion, discipline, and instruction well-guided,*
> *Without cause to be dreaded or fear of suspicion.*

It is not surprising that al-Nadim devotes an extensive section of his volume to how the Koran was supposed to have been assembled from the revelations of the prophet Mohammed. He discusses the various sources, editions and interpretations of the Koran, along with the Islamic sages who commented on the holy book and the people and places mentioned in it. Al-Nadim also includes careful notes on discrepancies in the Koran— inconsistencies, special characteristics of language or ideas, as well as other notable peculiarities in the sacred texts.

Apparently al-Nadim visited official libraries, bookstores, authors and private libraries in his search for books. Of one book collector, Mohammed ibn al-Husayn, who lived near Aleppo, al-Nadim writes: "I have never seen anyone else with a library as extensive as the one which he had. It certainly contained Arabic books about grammar, philology, and literature, as well as

ancient works. I met this man a number of times and, although he was friendly with me, he was wary and tight with his possessions."

Hand-copied books were valuable objects—prized particularly by the feudal chiefs who ruled Aleppo from 944 to 967 C.E. and who were commandeering books to build their own library. Al-Husayn was "tight" because he was worried that the Aleppo sheiks would learn of his beloved volumes and then confiscate them. Among his precious antique manuscripts, al-Nadim reports, were "trusts and contracts in the handwriting of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali," the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, along with documents in the hand of Mohammed's scribes.

While making his way from library to library and from city to city, al-Nadim was always on the watch for especially rare books. He knew of two eighth-century C.E. Arabic grammar books that had apparently been lost, since he could find no one who had ever seen a copy or knew of anyone who had. One can sense the palpable grief of a true bibliophile in al-Nadim's account of his futile search for these tomes.

Generally speaking, al-Nadim comments favorably upon the authors he mentions, but he is not above straight talk. Here he records the remarks of one author about another:

> He was first a teacher in a common school, but later did private work, being established at the Paper Workers' Bazaar … on the East Side [of Baghdad]. I have never seen anyone who became known so quickly as he became known for compiling books and reciting poetry, most of which he corrupted. In fact there never was anyone more stupid intellectually or more erroneous in pronunciation than he was … but at the same time he had a praiseworthy character, with a pleasant social manner, mellowed by maturity.

Of a well-known man named al-Suli, "one of the brilliant men of letters and collectors of books," al-Nadim reports a long list of admirable things, from his writing important books to his being a champion chess player. But the news about al-Suli is not all good. In his magnum opus on poetry, entitled *Leaves*, al-Nadim observes, "he relied upon the book of al-Marthadi about poetry and the poets; in fact he transcribed and plagiarized it. I have seen a copy of [the work of] this man [al-Marthadi] which came from the library of al-Suli and by which he was exposed."

One intriguing passage in the *Fihrist* concerns ancient Persian astronomy. After carefully describing how Persian scientists treated the bark of the white poplar tree to produce a durable writing material, al-Nadim informs us that they wrote down detailed astronomical tables collected from as far back as the Babylonians. Then the ancient scientists looked for a city where the climate was optimal for preserving these records. They determined upon the Persian city of Jayy:

> Then they went … inside the city of Jayy, to make it the depository for their sciences. This [depository] was called Sarwayh [Saruyah] and it has lasted until our own time. In regard to this building … many years before our time a side [of the building] became ruined. Then they found a vault in the cleft-off side … in which they discovered many books of the ancients, written on white poplar bark … and containing all of the sciences of the forefathers written in the old Persian form of writing.

Al-Nadim reports further that he had it on "reliable authority" that in 961 or 962 "another vaulted building cracked open … Many books were discovered in this place, but nobody found

out how to read them." The author then informs us that a decade before he had seen for himself books in Greek that had been found in a wall of the city (presumably Jayy). Al-Nadim closes this account by observing that in ancient times learning was forbidden except for those who were scholars or known to be able to receive learning by natural genius. Although the Greeks and Romans promoted learning, the Byzantine Christians forbade literacy except for the study of theology. In contrast, al-Nadim believed that Islam encourages the pursuit of literacy and knowledge.

Although the *Fihrist* is probably most valuable as a compendium of knowledge, it also preserves the spirit of its times through informative and entertaining narratives. One such story tells of a cotton worker named Mohammed ibn Kullab, who had a running theological debate with an acquaintance. Ibn Kullab contended that the Word of Allah, notably the Koran, is also Allah. His interlocutor then accused ibn Kullab of being a Christian, since Christians believed, on the basis of the Gospel of John, that the Word is God, and asked, "What do you have to say about the Christ (al-Masih)?" He would say the same thing about Christ that the Sunni Muslims say about the Koran, ibn Kullab responded: He is the Word of God.

This story nicely illustrates al-Nadim's tone of mind: tolerant, curious, often bemused. Not only does the *Fihrist* show the breadth of al-Nadim's knowledge, it is also a testament to his compassion. This devout Muslim, extremely proud of his culture and heritage, honored the beliefs of other peoples and gave them residence in his life's work. He knew much about Judaism and Christianity, for example; he knew their histories, their scriptures, their religious beliefs. He knew the works of ancient Greek, Hindu and Chinese scholars. He was fascinated by the world beyond his own, so he built a monument to it, the *Fihrist*, which shines brightly with his humane spirit.

Notes

1 See J. Harold Ellens, "The Ancient Library of Alexandria: The West's Most Important Repository of Learning," **BR** 13:01.

2 Al-Nadim provides numerous accounts of book collections in remote places. For example, he tells of one sage, Khalid ibn Yzid ibn Mu'awiyah, who ordered a group of Greek philosophers from a city in Egypt, presumably Alexandria, to translate Greek and Coptic scientific books into Arabic (p. 581). Al-Nadim gives one unusually interesting account: "I heard Abu Ishaq ibn Shahram tell in a general gathering that there is in the Byzantine country a temple of ancient construction. It has a portal larger than any other ever seen with both gates made of iron. In ancient times, when they worshipped heavenly bodies and idols, the Greeks exalted this [temple], praying and sacrificing in it. He [Ibn Shahram] said, 'I asked the emperor of the Byzantines to open it for me, but this was impossible, as it had been locked since the time that the Byzantines had become Christians. I continued, however, to be courteous to him, to correspond with him, and also to entreat him in conversation during my stay at his court. … He agreed to open it and, behold, this building was made of marble and great colored stones, upon which there were many beautiful inscriptions and sculptures. I have never seen or heard of anything equaling its vastness and beauty. In this temple there were numerous camel loads of ancient books … Some of these [books] were worn and some in normal condition. Others were eaten by insects.' Then he said, 'I saw there gold offering utensils and other rare things.' He went on to say, 'After my exit the door was locked …' He believed that the building was a three-day journey from Constantinople" (pp. 585–586). It is likely that this was the famous Celsus Library at Ephesus, built in the second century C.E.

3 Callimachus (c. 305–235 B.C.E.) served under four successive chief librarians as the collector and collator of the Alexandria Library. He produced a 120-volume catalogue, called the *Pinakes*, of the library's 500,000 books (that number would reach 1,000,000 by the time of Jesus). The *Pinakes* contained information on each book's contents, provenance and author. After the library was destroyed in the seventh century C.E., many of its surviving books were apparently carried off to the imperial libraries of the caliphates, where they were translated into Persian and Arabic. For more information, see J. Harold Ellens, "You Can Look It Up!" **AO**

02:02; “The Ancient Library of Alexandria: The West’s Most Important Repository of Learning,” *BR* 13:01; *The Ancient Library of Alexandria and Early Christian Theological Development*, Occasional Papers no. 27 (Claremont, CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont Graduate University, 1993).

4 In the *Fihrist*, al-Nadim provides a summary of what others think of the Mu’tazilah (meaning “Those Who Separate Themselves”): “The Zaydiyah and Ibadiyah said that they did not believe in [God’s] grace, and were neither polytheists nor Muslims, but sinners. The companions of al-Hasan said that they were hypocrites and also sinners. All of the Mu’tazilah separated themselves from the things about which these [groups] differed. They said, ‘We agree about what they join in calling sin, but we avoid matters about which they disagree concerning unbelief, belief, hypocrisy, and polytheism’” (pp. 380–381).

Abraham's Sons



In this 12th-century mosaic from the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily the patriarch Abraham holds a knife above Isaac

How the Bible and Qur'an see the same story differently

By John Kaltner

In the Book of Genesis, Abraham leads his beloved son Isaac up Mt. Moriah and prepares to sacrifice him at God's command. In Muslim tradition, Ishmael is the near-victim. Jews, Christians and Muslims all trace their roots back to Abraham—but not through the same son: Ishmael is the traditional ancestor of the Arabs, especially Muslims, while Isaac is the forebear of Jews and Christians.

This is, of course, a simplified reading of the history of these peoples. Yet the common history, similar beliefs and shared traditions of Jews, Christians and Muslims suggest that the members of these three faiths are indeed relatives, even if distant ones. The sad fact is that for a long time two sides of this large extended family have rarely been on speaking terms, and when they have communicated, they have not had many nice things to say to each other. Their infrequent conversations have tended to repudiate, rather than celebrate, their common heritage.

The sacred texts of this family, the Bible and Qur'an (often spelled Koran), have been used to further estrange its members. The Bible and Qur'an are often pitted against each other to bolster the claims of one side and negate the claims of the other.

But when we begin to compare Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael in the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible, we find that despite some striking differences, their stories still have much in common. For Bible readers, an exploration of these similarities and divergences not only reveals what is distinctive about the Qur'an and Islam but sheds unexpected light on the biblical text.

The Genesis account of Isaac's near-death experience is undoubtedly one of the most dramatic, intense and famous scenes in all of biblical literature. As recorded in Genesis 22, at God's command Abraham leads his beloved son Isaac up Mt. Moriah, builds an altar, lays his son on it and prepares to sacrifice him. When Isaac innocently asks, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb" (Genesis 22:7, 8).

Abraham raises his knife, but before the blade falls, an angel of the Lord cries out, "Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Genesis 22:12). Abraham looks up and spies a ram caught in a thicket and sacrifices the animal in Isaac's place.

Then the Lord, speaking through the angel, promises Abraham: "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore" (Genesis 23:17).

This covenant, God has already informed Abraham, will live on through Isaac (Genesis 17:19).

Readers familiar with the biblical version of this story may find the Qur'an's condensed version difficult to follow. The story begins with Abraham praying for a faithful child, a prayer that is granted. But Abraham has a troubling premonition: He must sacrifice the child.

The boy in the Qur'an account is unnamed. Only in later Muslim tradition, as we shall see, is he identified. Allah (the Arabic term for God) is referred to in the first person plural "We," as is common throughout the Qur'an. This in no way violates the monotheistic belief of Islam but is an example of the "divine we" used to elevate and exalt the deity. A similar convention is found in Genesis, when God says, "Let us make humankind in our image" (Genesis 1:26).

The entire near-sacrifice passage, found in *su´ra* (chapter) 37 of the Qur'an, reads:

> (Abraham prayed,) "My Lord, grant me one from among the righteous." So We [Allah] gave him the good news of a mild-tempered son. When he [the son] was old enough to work with him he [Abraham] said, "Oh, my son, I have dreamed that I should sacrifice you. What do you think of that?"
>
> He [The son] said, "Oh, my father, do what you have been commanded. If Allah wills, you will find me patient." When they both submitted and he [Abraham] threw him [the son] face down, We called to him, "Oh, Abraham, you have fulfilled the dream. Thus do We reward those who do good." Truly, that was a clear test and We ransomed him with a great sacrifice. Through the succeeding generations We left upon him the salutation: "Peace be upon Abraham!" Thus do We reward those who do good. Truly, he was among our believing servants. And We gave him the good news of Isaac a prophet from among the righteous.
>
> (Qur'an 37:100–112)

The passage shares the same basic plot with the Genesis narrative: Abraham prays for and is granted a son. He receives a divine command to sacrifice the child. He prepares to comply but is stopped just in time and is blessed. Beyond this, however, the accounts in Genesis and in the Qur'an vary in some important ways.

Bible readers may find the Qur'an version choppy and difficult to follow. The birth of the son is immediately followed by the sacrifice account. We learn nothing of the years between. Furthermore, the near-sacrifice is not told as part of a larger story concerning Abraham's family. The Qur'an discusses only a few incidents in Abraham's life, including the near-sacrifice, and these episodes are scattered throughout the book.

The Qur'an does not begin with the creation of the world and then recount history in chronological order. It arranges its material in a different way, often grouping together passages with common themes. The Qur'an's account of the near-sacrifice, for example, is immediately followed by pronouncements concerning Moses, Elijah, Lot and Jonah (in that order). The theme that unites all of these individuals is their fidelity to the divine will, for which they receive blessings in return. In the Qur'an, Abraham's trust in Allah is being compared to the responses of these other figures who endure their own tests.

In its narrative sections, the Qur'an is less concerned with recounting history or telling a good story than with making a specific point. Only those narrative elements needed to teach that particular lesson are included. Seemingly extraneous details are left out. Once the point has been made, the text shifts to another, sometimes unrelated, issue. For Bible readers, these very details are what make the Genesis story so compelling. The tension builds as we read of Abraham cutting the wood, loading the donkey, summoning his servants, traveling for three days, building an altar and finally wielding the knife above his son. None of this appears in the Qur'an.

Perhaps the most noticeable "missing" detail in the Qur'an for the Bible reader is the name of the boy who undergoes this near-death experience. For centuries, Muslim commentators have debated his identity.

Early on, most Muslim scholars favored the view that Isaac was the intended victim. For example, there is an early Islamic tradition that says Ali and Umar, two of the caliphs who led the Muslim community soon after Muhammad's death, claimed that Isaac was the son who was nearly sacrificed.

Eventually, a shift in thinking occurred that saw Ishmael as the near-sacrifice, and this is the dominant view among Muslims today. The precise reason for this change is hard to determine, but it does not appear to be a reaction to the biblical identification of the son as Isaac. There were, to be sure, some stories among early Muslims that the Jews had substituted Isaac's name for Ishmael's in the Bible. But many scholars think the shift reflects Arab tensions with the Persian, rather than the Jewish, community. Al-Mas'udi, a tenth-century Muslim historian, cites a Persian poet from his time who claims his lineage is superior to that of the Arabs because Persians are descended from Isaac, "the victim."

Many look to the Qur'an passage to determine the identity of the boy. Some see the passage's final verse—"And We gave him the good news of Isaac a prophet from among the righteous"—as the key. But here, too, there is a degree of ambiguity.

The phrase "good news" is used to announce several births in the Qur'an, including those of John the Baptist and Jesus. Here Allah is announcing to Abraham that his wife will give birth to Isaac. If we read the entire passage sequentially, with the announcement of Isaac following the near-sacrifice, then we must identify the unnamed son as Ishmael. Isaac cannot be the intended

victim because he wasn't born yet. But the announcement at the end of the quoted passage can also be read as a sort of summary of the events that have just been discussed. If so, Isaac is probably the anonymous near-victim. Another clue in favor of Isaac is the use of the term "righteous" to describe the unnamed son in the first verse and Isaac in the last. But in the end, the Qur'an simply does not provide enough information to make a positive identification of the boy.

A more intriguing question might be why the Qur'an does not name the son. Why was this detail—so critical to the biblical passage—considered insignificant in the Qur'an? What does this difference tell us about the way the near-sacrifice story functions in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions?

In the Bible, Isaac, and not Ishmael, is the son through whom God's covenant with Abraham will continue. God tells Abraham:

> Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.
>
> (Genesis 17:19)

Isaac's momentous role in the history of Israel is highlighted throughout Genesis, which revels in the details of his life: We learn of his birth and youth, and of his father's prodigious efforts to marry him to a kinswoman. We read of Isaac's first meeting with Rebecca and their subsequent marriage, of the birth of their sons Jacob and Esau, and of Jacob's deception of his aged father. The rest of the Book of Genesis is the story of Isaac's sons and his sons' sons. "This is the story of Isaac," the biblical author tells us in Genesis 25:19.

All this is threatened, however, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. That the covenant is in jeopardy is emphasized immediately before and after the near-sacrifice when Isaac is strangely referred to as Abraham's only son (Genesis 22:2, 12). What happened to Ishmael? Is he no longer Abraham's son? Furthermore, after Abraham passes the gruesome test, God must reinstate the covenant: "Because you…have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you" (Genesis 22:16–17).

In Genesis, Ishmael is the son not chosen. In comparison with his half-brother, Isaac, he leads a shadowy existence. From the outset, his position in the family is ambiguous since his mother, Hagar, is the maidservant of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Even before he is born, his pregnant mother is forced to temporarily flee into the wilderness to escape the anger of her mistress (Genesis 16). This foreshadows the permanent separation that occurs when Sarah convinces Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael after the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21:8–21). Ishmael is cut off from the family and forced to lead a nomadic existence: "He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow" (Genesis 21:20). His marriage further distances him from the family: "His mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt" (Genesis 21:21). He remains absent from the biblical account until the death of Abraham, when the elder son returns home to perform his filial duty and, with Isaac, bury Abraham. This is the only contact the adult Ishmael has with his family.

Their children, too, remain apart. Isaac becomes the ancestor of the Israelites through his son Jacob. Ishmael's descendants, the Ishmaelites, settle "from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria" (Genesis 25:18)—that is, in Arabia.

Not so in the Qur'an, which makes no suggestion whatever that the sons of Abraham gave rise to an ethnic or religious divide. Rather, the two sons are united in the Qur'an through their common faith and their family ties as sons of Abraham. Both are recognized as links in a chain

of prophets that extends from Abraham through Jesus to Muhammad. Each of these prophets received special revelation from Allah for the benefit of humanity. This idea is reflected in a passage that reads: "Say, 'We believe in Allah, what has been revealed to us, what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes and what was given to Moses, Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We do not make a distinction among any of them and to Him we submit'" (Qur'an 3:84).

There is no rift between Ishmael and Isaac in the Qur'an. Ishmael and his mother are never banished to the wilderness. Indeed, his mother is never mentioned. In the Qur'an it appears that Ishmael and Isaac have the same mother. It is only extra-Qur'anic sources that identify Ishmael's mother as Hagar. Ishmael is not a shadowy or dark figure: We learn more about him than about his brother. But this does not mean he is favored by Allah. Rather, both brothers are esteemed equally in the Qur'an. Neither is the sole heir to God's blessing.

Similarly, there is no suggestion in the Qur'an of a chosen people set apart to enjoy a special relationship with Allah. Islam maintains that all people are born Muslims ("submitters" to the divine will). It is impossible for Allah to choose some for salvation while excluding the rest. Each person must freely choose either to accept the message and surrender to the divine will or to decline. Those who do accept are considered offspring of Abraham; those who do not join the ranks of the unbelievers. The choice is up to the individual, not Allah.

The name of Abraham's son is not included in the Qur'an's version of the near-sacrifice because it is irrelevant. Each son is a model of faith, held up for the reader. Either would play the same role in this story. The important thing is that Abraham was willing to sacrifice a son—which one doesn't matter.

Even though the name of the son is deemed unimportant in the Qur'an, other details about him—details absent from the biblical record—are not.

The most important detail we are given is that at the time of the near-sacrifice the son was "old enough to work with his father" (Qur'an 37:102). The Arabic word for this concept, *sa'ya*, can mean "to be active or busy" or "able to engage in an activity with energy." But it also can mean "to act according to one's own judgment, discretion or free will." Thus, the son is not only physically mature enough to work with his father, he is also mentally able to do so. He has reached the age of reason. The son exhibits this very quality when Abraham asks him for his opinion of the troubling dream.

A model of piety, the son surrenders himself to the will of Allah. "Oh, my father, do what you have been commanded." Abraham might have been uncertain about what he should do, but he follows his son's lead and concludes that if Allah has commanded the sacrifice, it must be carried out. The text goes on to say, "They both submitted." This gets right at the heart of the message of this Qur'an passage. Taking Abraham and his son as models, all people must respond immediately and faithfully to the divine will. This is the only way to stay on the straight path of submission to God.

The Qur'an agrees with the Bible that the near-sacrifice is a divine test, but it is not clear in the Qur'an who is being tested. By interpreting his father's dream as a command from Allah, Abraham's son took the initial leap of faith that allowed both father and son to respond as ideal Muslims and submit themselves entirely. We should not overlook the fact that the son passed the test first.

Preachers and teachers of the Bible frequently turn to Genesis 22 for insight into Abraham's character. The Qur'an's condensed account, in which father and son play equal parts, invites us to reread the Genesis account through the son's eyes. Is the biblical version a testing of both father

and son? Does the Genesis story tell us anything about the son's belief in God? Does Isaac in any way help bring Abraham to faith?

In truth, we have very little idea in Genesis of what Isaac is thinking or feeling as the events unfold. The preponderance of narrative detail concerns Abraham; the son retreats into the background as a necessary but nondescript figure. But there is more to Isaac's character than initially meets the eye.

We know that Isaac is physically mature: He is strong enough to carry the wood for the sacrifice some distance up Mt. Moriah. But is he as mentally mature as the son in the Qur'an? The fact that Abraham says he and Isaac will worship on the mountain (Genesis 22:5) is one indication that the son has reached the age of reason. A careful reading of the text uncovers other factors pointing in the same direction.

In the Qur'an, Abraham asks his son about the dream he has had: "What do you think of that?" In responding, the son expresses his own faith in Allah and challenges his father to adopt the same posture of trust and confidence. This is the only conversation between the two that the text relates.

Interestingly, Genesis 22 also reports only one verbal encounter between father and son and it, too, is in the form of a question and answer. But here it is the son who asks the question: "Isaac said to his father, Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son'" (Genesis 22:7–8).

This is not idle chitchat. It is the only time Isaac speaks in Genesis 22, and his words indicate that he is able to evaluate his situation through observation and reason, just like the son in the Qur'an. Furthermore, of the many speeches Abraham makes in this chapter, this is the only one in which he explicitly articulates his faith in God. So, in both the Bible and the Qur'an, the son's words serve as the catalyst that brings the father to faith.

Is there any other hint that the biblical Abraham is transformed by Isaac's words? Before climbing the mountain, Abraham instructs the young men traveling with him, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you" (Genesis 22:5). His statement is a curious one, given Abraham's foreknowledge of what is supposed to happen on the mountain.

Perhaps Abraham knew that God would intervene and would not allow him to kill his son. But, then, how is this episode a test? Or perhaps Abraham did not yet believe he was capable of carrying out the divine command. If the latter is true, then Abraham is still struggling with the divine command when Isaac asks about the lamb.

Isaac's poignant question—"But where is the lamb?" (Genesis 22:7)—is then the turning point in Abraham's quest. Prior to this we can discern hesitancy on Abraham's part; afterwards he publicly expresses his trust in God and does all he can to fulfill the divine will. This dimension of the biblical story might easily escape our notice were it not for its high profile in the Qur'an.

Putting the two sides of Abraham's family in conversation with each other can often lead to such insights. Both texts present the episode as a lesson in faith, but in very different ways. In the Bible, this story is intimately tied to the theme of covenant. Isaac is essential for the realization of God's promise and when Abraham is asked to sacrifice him the future of the covenant is jeopardized. This is not the case in the Qur'an, where Abraham and his son are presented as model believers. They faithfully submit themselves to the divine will and are examples for future generations to do the same.

This article is based on John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

How the Qur'an Came to Be

By John Kaltner

Sometime around 610 C.E. an event occurred near the city of Mecca in modern day Saudi Arabia that changed the course of human history. A man named Muhammad, then about 40 years old, was meditating when he heard a voice that ordered him, "Recite!" (in Arabic, *Iqra*).

The voice, according to Islamic belief, belonged to the angel Gabriel, who had been sent from Allah (the Arabic word for God) to reveal a divine message that Muhammad was to deliver to his people. (Gabriel blows his horn in the manuscript illumination below, dated to about 1400. The image appears in a once-popular Arabic encyclopedia titled *The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*, which was compiled in Iraq in 1270. Although religious images were never included in Muslim holy books like the Qur'an, they do occasionally appear in epic stories and histories produced for the ruling classes.) During the next 22 years, until his death in the city of Medina in 632 C.E., Muhammad continued to receive similar messages. The Qur'an is the record of these revelations.

The Qur'an (sometimes spelled Koran) is about the same length as the New Testament and comprises 114 chapters of varying length that contain approximately 6,200 verses. Each chapter, or *su´ra* in Arabic, has a title that is taken from some word or name that appears in that chapter. It is also common to designate the chapters by number. So, for example, the citation 19:30 refers to the 30th verse of *su´ra* 19, which also goes by the name "Mary," due to the important role Jesus' mother plays in the chapter.

The earliest revelations Muhammad received in Mecca took the form of warnings directed to his people. They are usually very brief, impassioned pleas that call for the rejection of polytheism and a return to the worship of Allah, the only God. Those who refused to comply, these revelations warned, would suffer severe consequences. The fate awaiting those who reject the message is contrasted with that of those who accept it in 85:10–11: "Truly, those who deceive believing men and women but do not repent will receive the punishment of Hell, the punishment of burning. Those who believe and do what is right will receive gardens flowing with rivers. That is the great victory!"[a]

The message was not well received by many of the people of Mecca, which enjoyed a reputation as a prominent religious center that contained the Ka'ba, a shrine identified with a large number of gods and goddesses. Few Meccans wished to dismantle a religious system that enhanced their city's status and contributed a great deal to its coffers.

The fortunes of the nascent Muslim community began to change, however, when Muhammad was invited in 622 to serve as leader and judge in the city of Yathrib, about 200 miles north of Mecca. The *hijra*—Muhammad's migration to Yathrib with about 100 followers—is considered the founding event of Islam. Yathrib

soon came to be called "the City of the Prophet" and, for short, "the City," in Arabic *Medina*, the name by which it has been known ever since.

In Medina, Muhammad continued to receive revelations, but their tone and content changed. The brief passionate warnings about the need to convert were replaced with lengthier messages that addressed the concerns of the growing community: Worship, ethics and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are among the topics treated in the Medinan texts. It is primarily among these later revelations that we find extended narratives about characters from the Hebrew Bible.

The revelations to Muhammad are not presented in strict chronological order in the Qur'an. Rather, the chapters are arranged by length, with the longest, generally from the later Medinan period, coming first and the shortest, generally from the earlier Meccan period, found at the end. Thus, Muhammad's first revelation, "Recite…" appears toward the end, in *su´ra* 96.

Jewish, Christian and Islamic scholars have all attempted to explain the intriguing parallels between the Bible and the Qur'an, with little agreement. Traditionally, each scholar's personal theological perspective has been the key to how the issue is addressed. Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the final definitive word of Allah that was sent to Muhammad to correct the errors that were introduced into the previous scriptures by the followers of earlier prophets. Among these earlier scriptures are the Torah and the Gospel, which Allah originally revealed to Moses and Jesus but which, Islam says, were recorded in a distorted form in the Bible.

Some Jewish and Christian scholars have interpreted the shared textual traditions as evidence of the influence of their religions on Islam. This is a complicated issue that has sparked much scholarly debate. There was a Jewish presence in Medina during Muhammad's time. Christianity was present in the neighboring regions of Yemen, in southern Arabia, and Abyssinia, an African kingdom across the Red Sea that was visited by Muslims during Muhammad's lifetime. Furthermore, as Islam spread, Jews and Christians were among those who converted, and they brought with them knowledge and experience of their previous religions.

No doubt the early Muslim community had contact with Judaism and Christianity. But questions still remain regarding the precise nature of this exposure and the influence it may have exerted on the Qur'an.

The Qur'an, like the Bible, is the product of a complicated process of development that began with a period of oral transmission and culminated in its canonization as the official, definitive text of its community. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad was illiterate and therefore could not write down the revelations he received. Nonetheless, the Islamic sources make it clear that during his lifetime Muhammad's followers had already begun the process of preserving his message in written form.

Today we have Qur'an manuscripts from as early as the first centuries of Islam. Study of this evidence, as with biblical manuscripts, can be difficult. One of the greatest challenges is that the earliest manuscripts are written in what is called *scriptio defectiva*, a style of writing that does not include the dots and other marks that help differentiate Arabic letters that otherwise look identical. There is also the problem of textual variations and competing traditions. Different versions of the

Qur'an were in circulation soon after Muhammad's death. From the earliest days of Islam, scholars and other Muslim leaders have had to study these variants carefully and make decisions about which ones are authentic and which ones are not.

Notes

1 On the sacrifice story in ancient tradition, see Theodore H. Feder and Hershel Shanks, "Iphigenia and Isaac," *AO* 05:03 (available at www.biblereview.org under Keep Reading); and Robin M. Jensen, "The Binding of Isaac: How Jews and Christians See Differently," **BR** 09:05.

2 The translation is my own. According to Islamic belief, Arabic is the only proper language for the Qur'an since this was the form in which it was revealed to Muhammad. All translations are considered interpretations. As the name *al-Qur'an* (The Recitation) suggests, the text is meant to be spoken, not read. The Arabic form of the text makes masterful use of rhyme, meter and imagery—much of which is lost in translations.

3 Although the Qur'an does not mention the expulsion of Hagar, later Islamic commentators, influenced by Jewish sources, do—but with an interesting twist. In these accounts, Abraham does not send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness alone, but accompanies them to Mecca, where he regularly visits them. This helps explain another Qur'anic episode (2:127), in which Abraham and Ishmael together construct the Ka'ba—the sacred building at the center of the Great Mosque of Mecca that is the focus of daily Muslim prayer and the annual pilgrimage. Today, pilgrims to Mecca recall Hagar and Ishmael's experiences as they run back and forth seven times between two sites in reenactment of Hagar's desperate search for water for herself and her son. Similar tradition has it that a well (called Zamzam) near the Ka'ba first sprung up when the child Ishmael scratched on the ground as his mother was looking for water.

4 The translations used here are my own.

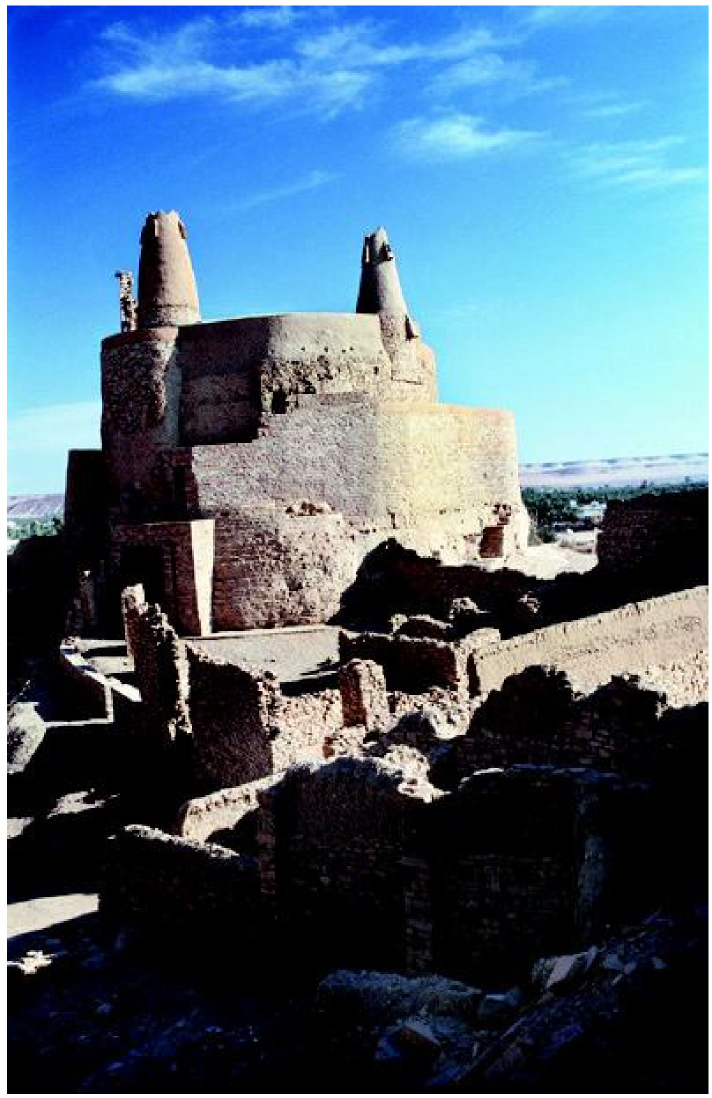
Desert Fortresses

Al-Jouf, Saudi Arabia

By Julie Skurdenis

Some of Saudi Arabia's most important ancient archaeological sites lie in the northwestern province of Al-Jouf, which is bordered on the south by the Nafud, one of the country's two great deserts.

Until recently, these sites have been inaccessible to visitors. This began to change in 1998, however, when the Kingdom—as most Saudis call their country—opened its doors to foreign tourists who come as part of a group. I was one of the lucky ones.



Resembling a large sand castle, the walled fortress of Qasr Marid overlooks the town of Domat Al-Jandal

According to Assyrian annals, King Sennacherib's army penetrated into Al-Jouf in 688 B.C., attacking "Adumatu [present-day Domat Al-Jandal], the stronghold of the Arabs." Around 550 B.C., the Babylonians led by king Nabonidus also captured Domat Al-Jandal and incorporated Al-Jouf into the Babylonian empire.

The Nabateans, who controlled the caravan routes between Arabia and the Mediterranean from the first century B.C. through the first century A.D., ruled from Petra in nearby Jordan. Domat Al-Jandal was one of their important trading centers because of its strategic position along the incense routes crossing northwest Arabia.

The Romans under Emperor Trajan annexed Nabatean lands in 106 A.D. Five hundred years later, when Islam swept across the Arabian peninsula, the prophet Mohammed himself led an expedition to Domat Al-Jandal.

Domat Al-Jandal's history therefore stretches back at least 2,700 years. Nowhere is the feeling of the past more vivid than at Qasr Marid, a picturesque walled fortress that resembles an elaborate sand castle. Although legend says the fort was constructed by a grandson of the biblical prophet Abraham, archaeological excavations carried out there in the 1980s uncovered pottery sherds dating

only to the Nabatean era. Roman records mention that Queen Zenobia of Tadmor (present-day Palmyra, Syria) unsuccessfully attacked the fortress in 270 A.D.

Qasr Marid is a labyrinth of crumbling mudbrick, interspersed with towers. As you ascend the steep, narrow steps from one level to the next, you are rewarded with expansive views of the ruins of the ancient town's streets and houses—some of which are 1,000 years old.

Adjacent to the fortress is the Omar Mosque, built in 634 A.D. by the second caliph, Omar bin Al-Khattab. Its tapered minaret has a passageway through its base leading into the mosque complex. Since this is still a functioning mosque, foreign visitors are usually not permitted to enter, but the caretaker invited our group inside to see the simple interior courtyard and prayer hall.

More archaeological sites are found near the town of Sakaka, 30 miles northeast of Domat Al-Jandal. Much as Domat Al-Jandal is dominated by Qasr Marid, Sakaka is dominated by Qasr Zabal, a fortress dating to the 19th century A.D. While walking up a steep, winding path to reach the mudbrick-and-stone fortress, a sandstone hill comes into view. There, on a large swathe of exposed black stone, figures of joyous dancers are carved into the rock. The carvings date to the pre-Islamic period (prior to the seventh century A.D.).

Four miles south of Sakaka is the mudbrick village of Al-Tuwair, which probably dates to Nabatean times. Extraordinary images—depictions of camels, donkeys, ibexes and ostriches—cover nearby rocks. Intermixed with the petroglyphs are inscriptions carved over a span of 1,000 years.

My favorite archaeological site in Al-Jouf—and certainly one of the most evocative—is Al-Rajajil, 7 miles south of Sakaka. Littering the bleak, sandy area are 50 clusters of stone columns, some still standing 10 feet high. Others tilt precariously, “like a defeated army after a battle,” as one member of our group put it. These mysterious standing stones were raised more than 5,500 years ago by an unknown people for an unknown purpose.

